



# Ethical immanence

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### Abstract

Ethical judgement suffuses everyday life: it is not only objectified in rules or codes, experienced as duty, or realised as reason distinct from action. Nor in its primary manifestations is the ethical realised as a separate domain of thought, activity or expertise. The possibility that we explore in this collection is that ethics is immanent to action and to social life more generally, within it rather than at arm's length from it. Our intention is not to reach unanimity, claim an exclusive truth or build a consistent model, but to follow the diverse paths along which thinking about the ethical in this way leads us.

### Keywords

Ethics, ethnography, immanence, imminence, morality, ordinary ethics

A long tradition in Western philosophy locates ethics in transcendent powers of reason and in the duties that rational beings qua rational beings owe to one another. A recent development from within this tradition, but going beyond it, turns ethics into a form of expertise, addressing 'big' issues from abortion and doctor-assisted suicide to violent protest, war and the responsibilities of one nation

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vis-a-vis another. This understanding rests upon a series of, perhaps tacit but nevertheless fundamental, oppositions between reason and habit, between reflection and action, between extraordinary and ordinary. In contrast, a specifically anthropological approach that has emerged over the past several years has, while not totally ignoring questions of reason and duty, tended to focus attention on the manifest ways in which ethics is relevant to, and immanent within, talk, action and character. Thus, Veena Das (2012: 134) has encouraged us to turn from ‘thinking of the ethical as made up of judgments we arrive at when we stand away from our ordinary practices to [...] thinking of the ethical as a dimension of everyday life’. According to this view ethical judgement suffuses everyday life: it is not only objectified in rules or codes, experienced as duty or realised as reason distinct from action. Nor, in its primary manifestations, is the ethical realised as a separate domain of thought, activity or expertise. Rather, ethics is an ‘an emergent quality or property of action, better grasped adverbially or adjectively than by means of a noun’ that we might seek to ‘discern and appreciate [...] much as we could learn more deeply to perceive the beauty or geological foundation of a landscape or enjoy a work of art or music’ (Lambek, 2015: 2).

Following Das, ‘ethical’ in our sense applies to the care with which people attend to life and the fact that all actions are subject to judgement both from others and by those who author them. We often use ‘ethical’ to distinguish our concept from more common depictions of ‘ethics’. That we do not treat ethics in the first instance as an object means that we are not concerned with trying to define or adjudicate what falls within or outside its purview; nor are we concerned to fully discriminate it from neighbouring terms like morality.<sup>1</sup> The possibility that we explore in this collection is that ethics is immanent to action and to social life more generally, within it rather than at arm’s length from it. Our intention is not to reach unanimity, claim an exclusive truth or build a consistent model, but to follow the diverse paths along which thinking about the ethical in this way leads us, so that we are able ‘to participate in life-with-the-concept’, as Cora Diamond (1998: 266) puts it.

It is hard to imagine the person or the self apart from the ethical. From a first person perspective (Mattingly, 2014), ethical considerations bear on much, if not all, I do insofar as I ask how my action reveals the kind of person I am or contributes to the kind of person I will become, how my action fits with my vision of the good life, how my action bears on my duties and obligations to others, how my action may issue in consequences not just for myself and those around me but for an indefinite range of others. Ethics concerns *what matters*. A species of ethical thought (a lesser species perhaps) is also implicated in my thinking about how my action exhibits or displays to others that I have considered these questions; that is, how my action displays the range of ethical considerations that I have taken into account (Goffman, 1959).

Shifting from a first to a third person stance, and hence focusing not on self-conscious reflection per se, attention to the immanence of the ethical has further consequences for how we think about action. From this perspective, ethics in the

first instance is intrinsic to action rather than secondary to it; it is not something above or beyond it, not first a commentary on action (or persons), but within action (and character). Thus, irrespective of whether or not we go on to attend to the objectification of ethical reflection in explicit or conclusive evaluations, maxims, rules, codes, laws, theologies or philosophical treatises, to conceptualise the ethical as immanent is to profoundly configure (bring out or transform) our understanding of the very nature of persons and actions.

We can clarify our view by responding to one of our most articulate critics. In an article provocatively titled, 'No ordinary ethics', Michael Lempert (2013) speaks of the 'discursive work of moralization' (371, 378) and of making ethics 'intersubjectively evident (371).<sup>2</sup> He uses these terms to criticise the notion of ethical immanence and to suggest that ethics is not 'ordinary in this sense of being unproblematically there'. But his sense that ethics must take some kind of semiotic form, even if this is not 'denotationally "explicit"' (Lempert, 2013: 378), is based on the fact that he thinks about it in terms of one's duties to others. Ethics for Lempert is essentially moral obligation, and moralisation happens when someone calls attention to an expectation of such an obligation or a failure to meet one. It is perhaps then not surprising to find that Lempert uses the terms 'ethics' and 'morality' (and their derivatives) interchangeably, but in effect what he refers to as 'ethics' is what Bernard Williams (1985) distinguished and limited as 'morality'.<sup>3</sup> Lambek (2015b: 129), in his response, notes that in his own view ethics is manifest in the necessity for judgement and is realised through judgement and that it is only in a secondary sense 'that ethics or the ethical refers to specifically "good" or "wise" judgment'.<sup>4</sup> This is a crucial point – ethics is not, in our view at least, to be equated with the good, and it is not reducible to a concern for others. While, to be sure, ethics is commonly conceptualised in such a narrow way, this fails to register both the reflective aspect of ethics and the pervasiveness, ambiguity, lack of closure and sheer difficulty that are often inherent in practical judgement.<sup>5</sup>

There are, then, various possible ways in which to conceptualise the ethical.<sup>6</sup> First, there is the view developed by Lambek and by Das which sees ethics as intrinsic to action regardless of whether or not that action is semiotically characterisable (objectified, discursively moralised, made intersubjectively relevant and pragmatically consequential) in moral terms (i.e. as 'good', 'bad', 'right', 'wrong', 'fair', 'unjust', etc.).<sup>7</sup> Ethics, from this perspective, resides in the judgements and evaluations, the inherent reflexivity, of ordinary action.<sup>8</sup> Values and virtues are multiple, and virtuous action is not reducible to action in accordance with moral rules or concern or attention to others. These are considerations that may enter into ethical reflection but they themselves do not constitute the ethical. In a related but different view, the ethical could be seen as the domain in which we exercise freedom with respect to our circumstances through the possibilities of reflective awareness (Laidlaw, 2002, 2013, Frankfurt, 1971 and Taylor, 1985). We do not simply act as good mothers or dutiful daughters; we reflect on what that could mean, what it amounts to and whether, in this situation, it is more important to be a good mother or a dutiful daughter, etc. (see Mattingly, 2014).

From this viewpoint ethics is not located specifically in ‘discursive interaction’ as Lempert (2013: 370) puts it (‘interaction mediated by actual language use’) because the ethical is not tied in any but the most contingent way to events or occasions of interaction; rather it underlies them, it is what makes interaction possible in the first place. Lempert asks how ethics is made intersubjectively relevant, but this misses the point that intersubjectivity is already a manifestation of ethics (Sidnell, 2010).

Another approach to ethics that is compatible with our view of immanence is that expounded by Foucault and given anthropological elaboration by Laidlaw, Faubion and Mahmood, among others. According to this view, ethics is not so much about one’s relations to others as about the relation to oneself. From this perspective, ethics is inherently self-reflective in a rather different way—ethical practice is the work the individual performs on itself to produce a particular kind of person. In this view too, ethics involves a capacity for self-reflection, whether to see oneself independently of social relations, morals and norms, or to work on oneself with respect to divine orders. Ethics is not another word for social norms or morality; rather, it is the reflective affordance (Keane, 2016) that is built into—that is, immanent to—culture. It is the capacity (and perhaps necessity) to reflect upon the symbolic forms through which we think and communicate (and is, of course, enabled by these very forms). It is expressed in Nietzsche’s desire to re-evaluate all values, to ask about the value of our values. It is the critical (criterial) in the cultural.

Lempert’s (2013, 2014) suggestion that we locate ethics in particular events of ‘discursive interaction’ presupposes a particular conception of ethics as something like ‘attention to others’ or, alternatively, its mirror image—what Darwall (2006) called ‘the second person standpoint’, which is the claim I have to demand (Darwall’s term) respect and consideration from others. But under a more expansive definition, ethics is not tied uniquely to singular acts or events.<sup>9</sup> It cannot be, in part, because human goals extend further than the present moment. As such, we need to introduce a notion of ‘project’, an overarching framework or set of frameworks within which acts are combined in an effort to achieve larger goals. Such projects may involve the participation of many persons and are thus collective engagements with others. However, many ethical projects point to ends that are essentially unrealisable (e.g. total self-mastery, absolute piety, self-abnegation, etc.). Perhaps in recognition of this, persons engaged in such projects may emphasise the importance of the efforts they make over the goals achieved and thus come to see ethics as immanent in the work itself.

Thus, the perspective of ordinary ethics invites attention not just to the everyday as opposed to the metaphysical or the hypothetical (runaway trolley cars, for example), but moreover and more importantly to the constitutive features of everyday life, to judgements, actions, interactions, relations, horizons, projects and language. As Veena Das suggests, a ‘descent into the ordinary’ provides for a view of ethical life as ‘the cultivation of sensibilities *within* the everyday’ (Das, 2012: 134).

What is immanent is what resides in, what inhabits, what is intrinsic to human being, to the human condition, not an external force or action.<sup>10</sup> To be human

means to be necessarily informed by the ethical (not specifically to be ‘good’); conversely put, the ethical is an inherent dimension of human being. To consider the immanence of ethics through action also implies that we take into account alternative actions that could have been taken, some of which are in contradiction to, or incommensurable with, the one taken, and similarly presupposed by the descriptions under which persons, relations and situations fall (Lambek, 2015a); hence the exercise of judgement is always at issue. From this perspective, the definition of an action is very broad, and judgement includes inaction (deliberate or not) and discerning intentions behind (in)actions, avoidances and silences.

Many conceptual and methodological questions follow from these suggestions: How do we demarcate an action or interaction when thinking of the ethical? How might we demarcate the ethical when thinking of action? How do discrete actions and life projects connect?<sup>11</sup> How do we have access to what falls under this broad conception of ethical action? If we consider that inactions, silences and avoidances, courses not taken, roads not followed, are part of the ethical as immanent, how do we take them into account in our ethnography?

It is clear that ‘in the midst of acts like deliberating, making excuses, and offering justifications instigated by the demands and expectations of social interaction’ (Keane, 2010: 68–69), ethics is unfolding and is never fully realised or accomplished. One act flows into another, an action inspires a reaction or a counter-action, a judgement is subject to further judgement. But more fundamentally, the meaning of an action is never definitively fixed. Understandings are provisional, good enough for the circumstances and so on. And in the temporal unfolding of actions, what happens next shapes what is understood to have happened before. Acts and circumstances originally placed under one description are re-described under another (whether by oneself or by others). This line of thinking introduces various complications. If ethics resides in (is immanent to) the hurly burly of ordinary action, what provides continuity across occasions and what kind of continuity (or discontinuity) is on offer in a given cultural setting?

Questions of continuity lead us to the temporal dimensions of the ethical. When Mattingly (2013: 308) writes about ‘the doing of ordinary life’, she reminds us that it cannot be the result of ‘training in a “school” that has a well-defined *telos* but is a much messier affair’. If we consider this temporal character of ethics, we might turn to the wordplay between immanence and imminence. Ethics is both already present (i.e. immanent) and as yet unrealised (i.e. imminent) in the sense that there are further acts, judgements, events and circumstances to follow. This means that we have to focus on the ‘about-to-be-present’ character of the ethical as well. Moreover, in attending to imminence, rupture, newness and experiments (no less than adherence to tradition, consistency or rule) can have a prominent role. When we say that ethics is unrealised, we also mean that we do not know (for sure) how ethical acts and judgements will be expressed. This is the way Mattingly (2013: 309) introduces the idea of a ‘space for the production of beginnings’ as integrated through the concept of ‘moral laboratory’.

Therefore, when we consider the imminent condition of ethics, we take into account the specific context and situation at hand. Context itself is complex, containing the tension between different calls upon us, perhaps at different scales, such as where, in practice, lines are drawn between what I can do now (feed my baby) and what I might attend to in some broader fashion (address world hunger). Moreover, conduct and judgement emerge in specific situations (the baby is crying, an image on television invites my compassion). From this perspective, the immanence of the ethical cannot be estimated without attention to its imminence.

A question that follows, then, is how we conceptualise the links between the socio-political context and the immanence of the ethical with the immanence of the political (Fassin, 2015). Das questions the articulation of the socio-political conditions and the ethical by addressing the ‘possibility of the ordinary’ that is itself eroded by a situation of poverty and violence (even, or especially, when these have become commonplace). She asks what it takes ‘to allow life to be renewed, to achieve the everyday, under conditions of grinding poverty or catastrophic violence that erode the very possibility of the ordinary’ (Das, 2012: 134).

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The articles that make up this collection were first presented at a workshop that we called ‘On the immanence and imminence of the ethical: Anthropological reflections on ethical time and presence’.<sup>12</sup> We began with the play on the proximity of the words ‘immanent’ and ‘imminent’. These words are frequently confused, but we want to suggest that the confusion may be a happy one, expanding from an argument that ethical is immanent to life, present before it is objectified or rationalised, to grasping the imminence of the situation and the temporal quality of ethical apprehension and response. Any discussion of immanence also begs the question of transcendence, with which it is frequently contrasted. Hence we situate our understanding of immanence with respect to transcendence as well.<sup>13</sup>

In developing this argument, it may be best to put our cards on the table and define the terms. Our authority here is the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

- *Immanent*. 1. Existing or operating within; inherent. 1.1. Present as a natural part of something; present everywhere. (Of God) permanently pervading and sustaining the universe. Often contrasted with transcendent. Synonyms: 1. inherent, intrinsic, innate, built-in, latent, essential, fundamental, basic, ingrained, natural. 2. omnipresent, ubiquitous, present everywhere. Available at: <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/91798?redirectedFrom=Immanent#eid>.
- *Imminent*. About to happen. Synonyms: impending, at hand, close, near, approaching, fast approaching, coming, forthcoming, on the way, upon us, in store, in the offing, in the pipeline, on the horizon, in the air, in the wind, brewing, looming, looming large; threatening, menacing; expected, anticipated; (informal) on the cards. Oxford English Dictionary, <http://www.oed.com>, Available at: <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/91904?redirectedFrom=imminent#eid>.

- *Transcendent*. 1. Beyond or above the range of normal or physical human experience. 1.1. Surpassing the ordinary; exceptional. 1.2. (Of God) existing apart from and not subject to the limitations of the material universe. Often contrasted with the immanent. 2. (In scholastic philosophy) higher than or not included in any of Aristotle's ten categories. 2.1. (In Kantian philosophy) not realizable in experience. Oxford English Dictionary, <http://www.oed.com>, Available at: <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/204609?redirectedFrom=Transcendent.#eid>.

Although the words 'immanent' and 'imminent' are neither oppositions nor complements to one another, their coincidence invites a certain wordplay. One can sense various pairs of terms that are perhaps 'immanent' in the definitions: latent and manifest, stasis and motion, structure and experience, essence and existence, being and becoming. In sum, the concept of imminence invites or underlines considerations of temporality and contingency with respect to the picture of immanence. It suggests movement, force, immediacy and openness, but also perhaps direction and the subjunctive—anticipation, uncertainty, the sense that things are unfinished, incomplete, that something more, something new, can happen and maybe even is about to happen. Imminence suggests that how we will act in a given situation is never fully known in advance; likewise, the consequences of our action could always be more or other than what we meant or anticipated—we are always about to find out. Response and re-description are about to happen, acknowledgement or disavowal is always possible. This is how Stanley Cavell (2005) discusses what he considers the risk of performative utterance. (How will you respond to my declaration of love?) If immanence describes what is present or within, imminence tells us not to be complacent.

Immanence is usually paired with transcendence and one could say that what is imminent, what is about to be, is transcendent to what is, now. Before turning more directly to imminence, it may be useful to briefly discuss the relationship between immanence and transcendence.<sup>14</sup> Together the words 'immanence' and 'transcendence' have long histories and multiple usages. They are not exactly commonplace terms of everyday speech, and their relation to one another (the relationship we give them) indexes various philosophical positions and problems, much as it once formed, and perhaps still today forms, the basis of theological imagination and debate: is God in the world or above and beyond it? Is God found in everything we are and do, immediate, in our souls and in our cells, in nature—and perhaps best conceived *as* nature—or is God something intrinsically other and external, beyond our reach and understanding, fundamentally unknowable and present only in distance or in absence? Insofar as the transcendent is a contextualisation of the limits within which we live or a recognition of something fully Other, is it best understood as signifying acceptance or refusal of our condition, an acknowledgement of human finitude or a surpassing of it, to which we finally have some kind of access (through prayer, asceticism, etc.)?

One can only enter these discussions with some temerity. For our purposes, we take the transcendent and the immanent to be intrinsically interconnected,

subsisting only in relation to one another and, in effect, presupposing one another. In other words, in our usage immanence and transcendence are not mutually exclusive oppositions. It is not helpful, for example, to debate whether divinity is *either* (entirely or exclusively) immanent *or* (entirely or exclusively) transcendent, and hence not both, when in religious practice and experience we see overlap and movement between them.<sup>15</sup>

We can conceptualise the relations between the immanent and transcendent in at least three ways. First, as in the example of the Christian concepts of the humanity of Jesus and the divinity of Christ or the presence of God as intimate and immediate yet also ultimately unknowable, we can see them in dialectical relation. Second, whether something is immanent or transcendent is surely at least in part a matter of scale and perspective—perspective that in practical life is always temporally situated, hence shifting. If we understand them, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) attempt to resolve this by speaking exclusively of what they call a plane of immanence. We prefer to think of immanence and transcendence as relative terms and relative to one another, such that, as Tom Boylston (2012) put it, what is ‘transcendent on one scale or from one perspective is immanent on a broader scale or from a more distant perspective.’<sup>16</sup> Thus, for Durkheim, religion could be transcendent from the perspective of the members of society but immanent to society from the perspective of the sociologist standing outside it. Likewise, acceptance of Christianity or Islam by members of an autochthonous society could render relatively immanent practices that were previously apprehended as transcendent or, conversely, render transcendent what had hitherto been immanent.

Third, and following from this, we can use the term immanent to describe or qualify transcendence. Here is a powerful illustration that will also direct us to the matter of temporality. In his late essay, ‘Life as transcendence’, which served as a significant influence on both Heidegger and Gadamer, Georg Simmel (2010: 8) writes, ‘Life at any given moment transcends itself’. This is not Heraclitic flux but is manifest through the individual being ‘a bounded form that continually oversteps its bounds[...].’ Simmel continues, ‘Insofar as life’s essence goes, *transcendence is immanent to it* (it is not something that might be added to its being, but instead is constitutive of its being)’ (2010: 9, emphasis added).

This is a profound observation. Hence, where Lambek has written of ethics as immanent to human action, speech and sociality in this constitutive sense (Lambek, 2015a), we would now draw from Simmel’s formulation to suggest that one way to describe the ethical (one facet of its appearance) is as the practical and reflective manifestation of that immanent transcendence. Moreover, we can take this transcendence that is immanent to life as one way to think about the temporality of human experience, emphasising life as it is lived in and before and beyond the act rather than as it is recorded, narrated or otherwise objectified after the fact.

The act here (understood in the performative sense as the decisive application of criteria to and in a given situation) is, in a way, always transcending itself, always pregnant with its outcome, with moving beyond the circumstances and conditions of its production to its effects and consequences (predictable and unpredictable).



Among the consequences are new descriptions of persons, relations and circumstances and further acts of practical judgement, including acknowledgement of what has just been done.<sup>17</sup>

The transcendence that is immanent to life is precisely not a matter of objectification but of possibility. The objectification of ethics—in rules, codes, rationalisations, philosophies and lately an object or subfield for anthropological investigation—comes later, after the act. We wish to acknowledge the unobjectified dimensions of ethical life. The ethical is immanent in at least the following respects: it is intrinsic to practical judgement and practical judgement is intrinsic to human existence, to speech, action and interaction; it is embedded in the temporality and consequentiality of action; speech and action draw on and discriminate among criteria and criteria are regularly instantiated and established through illocutionary force, as ordinary as greetings, or as extraordinary as curses, as unmarked as failure to speak or as marked as elaborate formal ritual; and the ethical is intrinsic to the acknowledgement of the eventual limits of criteria. We may not, and often do not, do what is right, good or otherwise virtuous, but we cannot avoid acting according to criteria that discriminate virtue and value or in circumstances that require judgement. In fact, we could say that the ethical is to speech (*parole*) or action what grammar is to language (*langue*).<sup>18</sup>

To say that the ethical is immanent is to say that it is found within action and within the life of language. This is not to say that it cannot also become objectified and even transcendent, made to stand over and above practice (as a grammar book is to speech), or that it does not draw upon forms transcendent to it, as found in religion or instituted in law, for truth and legitimacy. But, as Wittgenstein well perceived, it is not, in the first or last instance, an object in the world. In any case, and more generally, what we examine qua social scientists are not objects per se but objectifications and de-objectifications in the dialectical process of social life (Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

In a climate in which multiple auditors (in the sense of conducting audits, not of listening) watch us from above and outside (the panopticon, the iron cage) and admonitions, rules and taboos have evolved to a degree of objective autonomy such that the judgement of the actor is often rendered secondary to the application of the procedure, we need to remember that ethical criteria, judgements, acts and interpretations are not in the first instance objectified abstractions, transcendent to the ongoing pulse of life. Indeed, they are what constitute the pulse and tempo of life. They are not fully determined or predictable. They could be described, after Simmel, as the manifestation of the immanent transcendence that is (human) life.

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To speak of immanence risks submitting to the enchantments of philosophy in place of the circumstantiality of ethnography. And to focus on what is intrinsic risks ignoring what is contingent. It is in these respects that the concept of immanence is helpful. Ethical life is to be conceived in existential rather than in

essentialist terms; each circumstance and each judgement is live, contingent and followed by the next. Temporality is central to Simmel's depiction of life as transcendence. He writes of the 'protrusion of the past into the present' and the 'immediate carryover of present will—and feeling and thought—into the future' (Simmel, 2010: 7). 'Psychic existence projects out beyond its narrow present, so to speak; [...] the future is already encompassed within it' (Simmel, 2010: 8).<sup>19</sup> For Simmel this is specific to *life*: 'Life is truly both past and future; these are not just appended to it by thought, as they are,' he says, 'to inorganic, merely punctual reality' (Simmel, 2010: 8). This is the case for all living beings but it is amplified in human consciousness.

We can say that immanent transcendence has the quality of imminence—happening that is also always about to happen. Imminence directs us to emergence, anticipation, suspense, urgency—but also to hesitation, improvisation, interruption, postponement. Happening is the consummation of imminence in the outbreak of the event—thunder and lightning, downpour, orgasm, death. The French verb *éclater* seems to capture this better than the English 'burst'.

Imminence is relative to the life course—the anticipation of reaching adulthood, getting married, finishing the thesis, finding a job, wondering what will kill you. But it is also relative to scale. It plays out on a broad historical canvas with respect to war and peace, revolution and political succession, but also to investment and the calling in of debt, the dangerous flux of the capitalist economy and to social change more broadly.

But imminence is perhaps most salient at the smallest scale, in how each circumstance calls for my response, whether and how my action will bring forth your response, how habit threatens to repeat or break from itself, and in all the transference and countertransference people exhibit in their relations with one another. There are moments of irresolution or hesitation before something new emerges and responses are given in the form of new judgements and actions. 'In the midst of acts like deliberating, making excuses, and offering justifications instigated by the demands and expectations of social interaction' (Keane, 2010: 68–69), ethics is unfolding and never finally consummated. One act propels the next; an action inspires a reaction or a counteraction and so on. More fundamentally, the meaning of an action is never definitively fixed. Descriptions are provisional, perhaps good enough for the immediate circumstances, but leaving revision imminent, as what happens next reshapes what is understood to have happened before. Moreover, my judgement of a third party's act is subject to your judgement of mine. To return to a broader scale, think of the revisions of judgement concerning Heidegger's work and acts, or of contemporary judgement of Arendt's judgement concerning Eichmann's lack of judgement.

To speak of imminence is to address the phenomenology of time. One might consider Nietzsche on dissonance (Lambek, forthcoming) or the role of hesitation, elucidated by Alia Al-Saji, after Bergson, as 'the ontological interval wherein time makes a difference, wherein it acts in experience' (Al-Saji, 2014: 142) and wherein, she says, affect (rather than cognition) delays, renders visible and hence makes

possible transformations in habitual action.<sup>20</sup> This interval of hesitation is a subjective counterpart of what we have called imminence. Interestingly, Al-Saji sees such hesitation as an opening for challenging objectifications, for instance of the racialised other, enabling us to see *with* others, as fellow subjects, rather than merely to see them *as* others, as different objects. In sum, hesitation enables an ethical relation. Moreover, imminence here is not simply about the next action but equally concerns pathos. This argument complements discussions of responsiveness (Wentzer, 2014) and of passion or patience (Lambek, 2010) and, in fact, returns us to immanence.

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In sum, ethics can be conceived both as immanent (rather than objectified) and as imminent: emergent (rather than finished) and subject to continual revision, reworking and rethinking. Any given circumstance, act, judgement or interpretation is followed by another. Moreover, any given act can generate varied responses from multiple parties, responses that may not be in agreement with one another. There is no monovocality or univocity in ethical claims or judgements and no finality. Human life transcends itself.<sup>21</sup>

Imminence, in the sense of the forthcoming but as yet unrealised, offers an orthogonal view to that of immanence. To speak of imminence is to acknowledge the temporal and experiential dimensions of the ethical, and the contingent, underdetermined, unfinalised and unpredictable aspects of action and judgement. To understand the ethical simply as immanent, without taking into account the immediacy or urgency of real situations, of what could be about to happen, is to examine that immanence from a transcendent perspective, as it were, analytically or theoretically, rather than experientially or phenomenologically. Imminence brings forth the stark temporality of the ethical, elucidating the moment, or the anticipation of the moment, when the immanent becomes actual or eventual, when something—some particular thing—happens. Imminence captures that ‘just before’, the openness and possibility, perhaps the hesitation or suspense, that precedes or characterises sheer beginning, before the act, and henceforward the fact. Imminence speaks to the moment that some thinkers want to describe as freedom, when what will happen next hangs in the balance and depends on *me* or on *you*, or perhaps on the judgement of fate or of some ‘metaperson’ (Sahlins, 2017) in the form of a gracious or ill-disposed god, ancestor or spirit.

Imminence suggests disruption or interruption—and interruption affords, perhaps demands, ethical reflection. This is evident in the many interruptions described in the papers that follow, including Girish Daswani’s explicit depiction of ‘on again/off again’ power cuts in Ghana; Letha Victor’s account of acts of violence and incidents of bodily disruption in northern Uganda and the punctuation of conversations between Marco Motta and his Zanzibari friend by the appearances of a spirit, and even the interruption of one spirit by the voice of another. Indeed, the very scene of mishearing (misrecognition), like the one that

generated the workshop from which this set of papers emerged, affords a common instance of life from which the ethical proceeds.

The contributors to this collection were invited to ask what it means to take immanence seriously in exploring the various situations they encounter in their ethnographic practice and secondarily to think also about imminence. What, in terms that Keane draws from Gibson, are the affordances of taking the ethical as immanent? How might this enrich our understanding of what we see? And, conversely, what blind spots does it produce? The papers illuminate the immanence of ethical life in a variety of contexts and also show how attention to the ethical deepens the understanding of the contingencies that people in these contexts face. Each contributor takes our concepts and applies them in particular settings, settings that differ not only in their ethnographic locus, but with respect to different histories, different affective contexts and different dimensions of ordinary life. Additionally, because the concepts are open-ended, the authors address them in their own ways, showing different paths by which to take the ideas forward.

The subjects and contexts range from northern Ugandan Acholi trying to make their way through the senselessness of violence and its after-effects to urban Ghanaians dismayed at the corruption among political office holders, pious Jewish women in Jerusalem arguing over appropriate ritual behaviour and a young man in conflict over his personal situation in a poor quarter of Zanzibar.

Both Letha Victor and Marco Motta address irruptions of what Motta calls the ‘not quite “real”’. Victor’s rich discussion of purported spirit attacks at a secondary school for girls in the town of Gulu, Uganda, leads her to address the wide variety of ethical considerations brought into play at such moments. Here, what is immanent is rendered vividly immediate. The ethnography opens questions about divergent understandings of ethics—on the one hand, as a special domain that is activated through occasions of moral breakdown and, on the other, as inherent in action and manifest in practical judgement, discernment and evaluation. The case she examines begins in 2012 with a rash of apparent possessions, but it leads back in time to 2002 when one girl, Paska, was identified by her schoolmates as a witch and eventually fled the school. Victor asks how these events can be understood within different moral registers and how they complicate any easy distinction between the ordinary and extraordinary. Rather than treat events solely as evidence of social disruption and moral breakdown, Victor locates in them moments of everyday practical judgement and discernment. It is almost as if in northern Uganda the imminent is immanent—something unknown is always lurking, ready to reveal itself.

Victor carries out what she has elsewhere (2018: 117) called a ‘phenomenology of hermeneutic practice’, in which the spirit attacks themselves, no less than the discourse concerning them, are forms of interpretation and need to be taken together. In effect, her subject becomes the under-determinism of any single ethical evaluation or judgement. This is not only a matter of the under-determinism of human action, but action in a context in which there is no uncontested transcendent authority (religious, legal or scientific) that could provide consensus.

As a result, people live in uncertainty, with the next spiritual irruption, and the next set of responses, always imminent, as are further outbreaks of violence. As she says, people are forced to discern matters in the face of confusion, ‘and it is by virtue of provisional, tentative, and unsure acts through time that ethical projects and relations are continuously generated and transformed’ (2018: 117). If the ethical is immanent to human life, that does not mean it takes a specific form of expression.

In her interpretation of the events at the school, Victor brings in Nietzsche’s account of resentment, in which the dominated, weak or powerless experience a moral sentiment composed of envy and impotence. As she notes, after Nietzsche, resentment equates suffering with goodness. This has implications for the contemporary historical moment globally, not least with respect to the spread of populism. The question implicitly raised in Victor’s article is how to articulate resentment (or other moral sentiments) with our account of immanence.

Girish Daswani is also concerned with how to articulate concepts of immanence and imminence to moral sentiments and affects. Daswani writes of a context in which the ethical is interwoven with a much more explicit public politics in which direct speech of many kinds is possible, whether from journalists, campaigners or Christian pastors. This is a context in which the dominant moral sentiments, because more freely expressed, might be described as indignation and resentment rather than resentment. Daswani tracks a change in the way Ghanaians talk and think about politics, by which they come to understand corruption as a moral failure of character. For Daswani the ethnographic material encourages us to broaden and deepen our conception of ethical life by taking into account not only an affective dimension, but also the aleatory, unintended consequences of action and the many things that happen outside of one’s control. In effect, the (electrical) power crisis becomes a model of and for the contemporary ethical condition in Ghana, speaking to the ‘not yet’ and the ‘about to happen’. It also serves as an excellent metaphor for our concepts of immanence (when the power is working, it is part of our lifeworld and we don’t think about it) and imminence (power failures can happen at any time and are extremely disruptive).

Daswani adds to the discussion of immanence and imminence the need to consider the multiple time frames by which social life is organised and experienced in a given society, across which expectation and accountability may be differentially mapped. The ‘on/off’ of power shortages becomes a metaphor for the subverted ethical goals and the immediacy of frustration, but the temporal scale is broader than the immediate. In political terms, it concerns what Jane Guyer (2007) has called the ‘near future’, here goals of development and stability that are much more imaginable, and perhaps realisable, than in the northern Ugandan case. And in Christian terms, the temporality points to the eschatological. Imminence can be conceived in political terms as the ‘as yet unrealised’ and in Christian terms here as divine punishment for one’s sins.

Indeed, one of Daswani’s contributions is to emphasise the Christian roots of the concept of immanence itself. It is possible that the Christian sense of

immanence is itself 'immanent', as it were, in much anthropological discussion of the ethical and hence to be scrutinised more critically. However, the Christian discourse also provides Daswani with an original means to support our argument that it is not a *division* between the immanent and transcendental that is at issue.

Like Victor, Daswani (forthcoming) suggests that we offset the knowing ethical subject with an affective responsivity to the unknown and the unexpected. But he also points out that ethical judgement is retroactive, such that 'what happens next shapes what is understood to have happened before'. Like Victor he renders underdeterminacy and uncertainty central, in which ethical life becomes 'an affective or immanent response [...] that already includes the unexpected, the unknown and the miraculous'. We recognise the importance of adding the affective dimension, but would caution that it is not sufficient for understanding the immanence of the ethical, which rests as well on other factors to which we have pointed, including the illocutionary dimension of human language.

Hannah Mayne addresses questions of the transcendent and immanent in ethical life by exploring the practice of a group of Jewish religious feminist activists in Israel/Palestine, known as the Women of the Wall, and ultra-orthodox women who protest the former's practices. As she demonstrates through the study of the role of blessings and curses as speech acts, the ethical is always already immanent in religious action. The public performances are themselves ethical and political interventions. Mayne also addresses the explicitly transcendent dimension of religion that Robbins (2016) calls for. The women argue that 'while Jewish law begins in a divine realm, it must also relate to the realities of modern women's bodies today'. Both the Women of the Wall and those orthodox women who oppose them recognise the expression 'it is not in the heavens' in support of their contention that Jewish law is immanent rather than transcendent. However, the two sides reach quite different conclusions as to the import and significance of the Talmudic sources and rabbinical discussions. As Mayne (forthcoming) concludes, the ethical emerges in 'the practice of ongoing judgment and interpretation of transcendental laws, in a manner that invites immanent debate and argumentation about their imminent felicitous application'.

Finally, Marco Motta (forthcoming) takes the question from another angle and tries to 'transcend', as it were, the very question of immanence by turning to realism. In our view this complements our argument from a different perspective rather than directly challenging it. Motta makes a move from attending to ethics in the sense of 'what matters' to embrace also the difficulties in doing so. What concerns him is 'our understanding of the difficulty of having to live with the resistance that reality opposes to our very desire to grasp it'. In effect this is also what Victor was showing with respect to violence and envy and what Daswani was showing with respect to political transparency and economic well-being.

Motta argues that one facet of the immanence of ethics is that we often fail to see the point or fail to care, and that this failure is also a condition of life. It is equally a part of the life of our subjects and of the lives of their anthropologists (and at home no less than in the field). The ethical, he provocatively proposes,

emerges when we have failed to be ethical. In reflecting on incidents that took place during his fieldwork in Zanzibar and his complex relationship with a key interlocutor, Motta raises the important question of how anthropologists may fail to see precisely when they try too hard. How can we glimpse the ethical without distorting it by defining it? In effect, this is exactly the question raised by understanding the ethical as immanent. How, as Motta asks, after Veena Das, might one see ‘ethics as the expression of life as a whole’? Motta’s conception of ‘ordinary realism’ thus appears to comprehend what we are calling the immanence of the ethical and the imminence of events, as well as what is at stake in our most intimate social relations.

Motta takes issue with our discussion of projects, something that Victor and Daswani in fact each embrace. We suggest that this has to do in the first instance with Motta’s temporal scale, which is one of immediacy. Motta takes too literal a view of our word ‘grasp’, by which we mean ‘apprehend’, and moreover we know that Sele himself does have larger projects—to support a family, build a house and lead a life of dignity. However we do agree with the thrust of Motta’s question when he asks,

if we see ethics as a characteristic way of living ordinary life in which every moment *might* be (but *is not*) of a particular importance [...] then would we be able to bear in mind that we never really know *what* is ethical and *where* it is to be *found*?

This is precisely a question of imminence. Motta further writes,

because I do not know a priori how far our concept of ethics extends – i.e. I can describe its uses but cannot anticipate all the circumstances in which it would be projected, nor can I point at the limits of its uses – I cannot rely on a general consensus about what ethics (or realism) looks like (for example in the form of the “good”), nor about where to find such a thing (for example in the struggle for “freedom”).

We take this to be an extension of our point about ethical immanence and our rejection of substantive definitions. We do, however, have to be cautious when we are addressing ‘our’ concept of ethics, which may concern its immanence, and any explicit concepts found among our subjects.

Each contributor, in his or her own way, stops to consider that moment, that second before the word is uttered, the touch made, the face turned, that moment, each moment, when something is still possible.

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## Notes

1. For arguments on not distinguishing ethics from morality on practical grounds see Lambek, 2010 and 2015a. But, more generally, we side with Cora Diamond who distinguishes concepts from narrow forms of classification:

Grasping a concept [...] is not a matter just of knowing how to group things under that concept; it is being able to participate in life-with-the-concept ... To be able to use the concept "human being" is to be able to think about human life and what happens in it; it is not to be able to pick human beings out from other things or recommend that certain things be done to them or by them (Diamond, 1988: 266).

Later she contrasts a philosophically impoverished view of language in which

Description itself is thought of as something that can be pulled out of the context of human life and interests within which descriptions have their normal place. Against this, I have claimed that the capacity to use a descriptive term is a capacity to participate in the life from which that word comes; and that what it is to describe is many different kinds of activity (Diamond, 1988: 267).

2. See Lempert (2015: 134): 'when we embrace the idea of ethical immanence, we aren't likely to worry enough about the communicative labor by which the ethical is made intersubjectively relevant, socially recognizable, and pragmatically consequential'. See also Lempert (2013: 371): 'The performative contingency of ordinary ethics – the fact that ethical events require communicative labor to happen and are hence precarious achievements – complicates the very notion that the ethical is intrinsic to practice.'
3. This is made particularly obvious in the following passage from Lempert (2013: 373) in which he discusses conversation:

Everyday conversational practices seem to presuppose ethical principles. As conversation analysis has demonstrated, rarely do we brusquely decline an 'offer' or 'invitation,' for instance; instead, we temper our refusals with such behavior as palliatives ('that's awfully kind of you'), speech delays (filled or unfilled pauses) and dysfluencies (cut-off speech), and even 'accounts' where we state reasons – excuses – why we can't accept. Such conspicuous accounting for our non-acceptance, together with the delicate manner in which we exhibit



discomfort and express appreciation for our interlocutor, seem to rest on a sense of moral obligation, on what we owe others.

Here Lempert begins by talking about ‘ethical principles’ and ends with ‘moral obligation’, tying these together (and in essence equating them) by means of examples from conversational interaction.

4. See also Laidlaw (2014: 3): ‘The claim on which the anthropology of ethics rests is not an evaluative claim that people are good: it is a descriptive claim that they are evaluative.’
5. The reference here is to what Williams calls the morality system. This is not to imply that there are not much more sophisticated accounts within the Judaeo-Christian tradition and certainly not to imply that concepts of the good are irrelevant to ethics either for us or in other traditions.
6. In his discussion Lempert (2013) does not offer any elaboration of what he means by ethics or morality. Moreover, with the exception of Habermas, he does not engage with any of the extensive literature in philosophy.
7. In his response to Lambek, Lempert (2015) actually cites a passage relevant to this conception of ethics but then fails to register its intended meaning. The passage cited is the following:

I argue that ethics is an intrinsic dimension of human activity and interpretation irrespective of whether people are acting in ways that they or we consider specifically ‘ethical’ or ethically positive at any given moment. (from Lambek, 2010: 42)

Lempert reads this as an argument about the relation between ethics and discourse about ethics. He thus responds by saying:

If Lambek means what people say about behavior, presumably with some measure of self-consciousness, then it is easy to agree, since denotationally explicit reports are a notoriously bad methodological guide to action. (Lempert, 2015: 137)

It should be obvious by now, however, that the passage from Lambek is not at all about what people ‘say about behavior’, but rather about the intrinsically ethical (i.e. based in practical deliberation and judgement) character of human action.

8. This implies that people are paying a certain degree of attention rather than simply following a script. However, attention in our sense would include the situation described by Aristotle in which a truly virtuous person simply does the right thing in the circumstances without having to stop and think about it. That is, they are paying attention to the circumstances rather than reflecting on the appropriate response. Furthermore, while not all judgement need be described specifically as ethical, the focus on judgement also rejects an a priori distinction between ethics and aesthetics.
9. See Williams’s (1985) critique of this notion of ethics as reducible to singular, voluntary acts or events — according to him, this is one way in which the morality system has come to dominate our thinking about ethics.
10. To be clear, we are speaking of human being, not human bodies. We are not naturalising or essentialising the ethical.

11. We thank a referee for reminding us of this question.
12. The workshop was held at the Centre for Ethnography at the University of Toronto Scarborough in January 2016. Other presenters included Naisargi Dave, Hollis Moore and Donna Young, and Webb Keane as our distinguished discussant.
13. The argument about transcendence was composed before the appearance of Robbins, 2016.
14. What follows contains some unmarked quotations from Lambek, 2013.
15. This is certainly not to discount the centrality of the problem to a number of religious traditions and theological debates.
16. Tom Boylston, personal communication to Lambek, 9 May 2012.
17. For an elaboration of action in this sense, see Lambek (2010, 2015a).
18. Ethics in this sense is what distinguishes one act from another (paradigmatically) and what links them together (syntagmatically); it is what enables acts to make sense, to be perceived as such and not as brute movement or what ethologists consider 'behaviour'. We could also find support in Nietzsche who, in the words of Raymond Geuss 'repeatedly stresses that valuation, giving preference to one thing over another, discrimination is a central part of the way we live as human beings (GM II.8); he sometimes even calls it a fundamental property of "life itself" (JGB 9).' (Geuss 1999: 170, where GM = *On the Genealogy of Morality*; JGB = *Beyond Good and Evil*.)
19. This is not an argument about determinism or causality.
20. Our thanks to S Lambek for the reference.
21. It can also get stuck in inertia, apathy, boredom, neurosis, melancholia and so forth.

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